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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES.

Baltimore, January, 1889.

## THE FRENCH HISTORICAL INFINITIVE.—I.

### I. EXISTING THEORIES.

The historical infinitive, as it appears in Modern French, is one of those constructions which make us ask ourselves,—how did this mode of expression arise? and accordingly in almost every French grammar we find some attempt at explaining this somewhat unusual form of speech.

Let us see what some of these explanations are:—

AUBERTIN ('Grammaire moderne des écrivains français.' Paris, 1861. L. ix, §4) represents the infinitive as the earliest form which the verb assumes in our consciousness, hence in animated conversation, where we have no time to get beyond this first form, we make use of it instead of the finite verb; and he adds: "Le *de* est euphonique comme on en a tant vu . . .". AUBERTIN seems to have a dim notion that we ought to find in the popular consciousness the same series which we have in French grammars, where the infinitive always stands first in the paradigm. A. CHASSANG ('Nouvelle grammaire française.' Paris, 1880) speaking of our infinitive says, §330: "C'est un souvenir de l'infinitif de narration si usité en latin." He does not tell us how or why this remembering took place, or whether it was the people or the learned who remembered, so that we are just as wise as we were before. LITTRÉ in his dictionary under *de* (§20) says: "*De* devant un infinitif et pris absolument, c'est-à-dire sans nom ou verbe dont il soit le complément. On les appela, eux de courir, c'est-à-dire, sous-entendu, ils commencèrent, ils se hâtèrent de courir." This explanation, which we shall meet again in the Latin grammarians, is a logically satisfactory analysis of the meaning of this expression, and hence it is the one most generally met with, but a development of this infinitive such as LITTRÉ here presupposes, is by no means probable. We should have to assume a tendency in the popular mind to

disregard time relations in excited narration; but as it is impossible to conceive of anything taking place, without at the same time conceiving it as taking place at some time—since a time element is an essential part of all our ideas—some expression of this time element is absolutely indispensable. One could answer, it is true, that in the closely connected sentences in which the historical infinitive occurs, the 'time when' is already sufficiently determined by the preceding clause. But on the one hand, it is hard to believe that *ils commencèrent*—can ever have been used in such hurried speech, and what has never been in use can not of course be suppressed, and on the other hand if they ever did use *ils commencèrent* in such a connection, it is hard to believe that in their hurry they would have suppressed the finite verb, and have left out the *de* which is so closely connected with it.—P. CLAIRIN ('Du génitif latin et de la préposition *de*.' Paris, 1880) adopts LITTRÉ's explanation.

The earliest instance where this explanation is suggested in a French grammar, as far as I know, is found in PETRUS RAMUS, 'Grammaire Française' 1562 cited by LIVET ('La grammaire Française et les grammairiens du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle.' Paris, 1859) p. 251: "Le verbe délibératif gouverne l'infinitif: tu veux aymer ... Quelquefois le verbe délibératif est supprimé: et matins *de* courir et nous daller après."

These are all the attempts at an explanation which I have been able to find among French grammarians. They are unsatisfactory enough, as any attempt must be to explain an obscure construction by merely considering its logical relations, without investigating its growth in the development of the language. Let us see now what German grammarians have to say about our infinitive:—MÄTZNER holds that it is an elliptical construction ('Syntax,' I, §223 and 'Grammatik' §150 a 4). LÜCKING §428 and HÖLDER §189 take the same view. DIEZ, finally, ('Grammatik,' p. 929) saw that the construction could not be explained by an ellipsis. "Aus einer Ellipse ist dies gewiss nicht zu erklären; das vorgefügte *de* scheint seinen Grund eben nur in der Neigung dieser

Sprache zu haben, den reinen Infinitiv mit dem präpositionalen zu vertauschen." We shall see further on whether there is not a more satisfactory explanation for the presence of the *de*, and, beyond this *de*, DIEZ does not attempt an explanation. Thus we observe that the historical infinitive in French has not as yet received any explanation at all satisfactory to the historical grammarian.

## II.—THE LATIN HISTORICAL INFINITIVE.

As the French historical infinitive has so often been derived from the Latin historical infinitive, and as the use of this construction is very similar in both languages, it will be worth while to consider for a moment the views of Latin grammarians, ancient and modern.

PRISCIAN, QUINTILIAN and DONATUS all hold that we have here an ellipsis of *cæpit* or *cæperunt*, showing that the usual modern explanation is a very old one. To turn to modern grammarians, we have first MAX SCHMIDT ('ÜBER den Infinitiv,' Ratibor, 1824, p. 64) and F. C. SPIESS ('Disputatio grammatica de infinitivo historico, accusativo cum infinitivo, etc.' Wiesbaden, 1846), who think that the infinitive was the first form of the verb used by barbarous nations, just as it is, according to them, the first form used by children, and that the historical infinitive is a remnant of a primitive mode of speech. It is hardly worth while discussing this wonderful conception of the speech of savages and children. We know very well now that the infinitive is by no means the earliest and simplest form of the verb.

GUSTAVUS MOHR ('De infinitivo historico,' Halle, 1878) sums up his explanation as follows: "Nam, cum infinitivus omni definita personarum et numerorum distinctione careat, animo commoto scriptoris talibus in rebus describendis hæc verbi forma aptissima erat, utpote quæ nihil nisi actionem ipsam exprimeret, ne temporis quidem significatione indicata, cum hoc in genere semper usurpetur infinitivus præsentis." I must confess that this explanation does not seem to me at all adequate. We certainly easily lose our sense of actual time relations in excited narration, but it is inconceivable to me that we could represent any event to our consciousness in

such a way that no time relations, however obscure, should be connected with it. We have here again an attempt to explain a difficult construction without looking for its development in the past of the language. If, then, this theory is not tenable, there remains only the explanation of JOLLY. JOLLY ('Geschichte des Infinitivs,' München, 1873, p. 178) after disposing of the ellipsis theory and of the child-and-savage language theory, says: "So bleibt nur die dritte Annahme übrig, dass diese Infinitive sich aus der ursprünglichen Casusbedeutung der Infinitive erklären, und zwar ist klar, dass in diesen absoluten Constructionen, indem der Infinitivdativ oder Accusativ, der sich sonst an andere Bestandtheile des Satzes anzulehnen pflegte, nun einmal ganz selbstständig auftrat, sich seine Grundbedeutung concentrirte; daher kommt es, dass die alten absoluten Infinitive, wie sie überall der energischen Rede angehören, auch die ursprüngliche Energie des Casus noch am stärksten bewahrt haben." And p. 181: "Reyssig in den Vorlesungen über lateinische Sprachwissenschaft glaubt bereits den Ursprung des historischen Infinitivs in dem Rapportstyl der Kriegsberichte gefunden zu haben. Ohne bestreiten zu wollen, dass der historische Infinitiv der knappen soldatischen Ausdrucksweise besonders angemessen ist, kann ich doch derselben höchstens einen, zudem nicht nachgewiesenen Einfluss auf die weitere Verbreitung des historischen Infinitivs zuerkennen, denn der historische Infinitiv ist viel älter als die Rapporte der römischen Feldherren. Dafür zeugt vor Allem die Analogie des Litauischen, als einer uralterthümlichen Sprache; in beiden Sprachen entwickelte sich aus der vorwärts strebenden, dativischen Kraft des Infinitivs sein Gebrauch in eilfertiger, rasch voranschreitender Erzählung." A comparison with the French historical infinitive will, it is hoped, make it still clearer that this explanation is essentially correct, if we can show that the French historical infinitive was developed in very much the same way. At present I would merely observe that this so-called dative force of the infinitive would be even more likely to lead to a use of this mood instead of the imperative in vehement exhortations and appeals.

### III.—IS THE FRENCH HISTORICAL INFINITIVE DERIVED FROM THE LATIN HISTORICAL INFINITIVE?

Let us now return to the historical infinitive in French. The first question we have to settle is whether this construction was derived from the Latin. This might either have taken place by unbroken transmission, or else it might have been artificially introduced by the learned. Let us first consider whether our infinitive was used without a break in the speech of the people. This certainly was not the case. The Latin historical infinitive, which was at first an expression familiar to the people, as is evident from its frequent use by the early writers of comedies (see DRAEGER, 'Historische Syntax der lateinischen Sprache.' Leipzig, 1878, I, p. 329), and which later on was used by a few writers of the Empire (SALLUST, TACITUS, LIVIUS) in their highly artificial language in order to add to the vividness of their word-pictures, seems to have vanished pretty early from the language of conversation. SUETONIUS does not have it at all, and JUSTINIUS has it only once (see HÜBENTHAL, 'De infinitivo historico.' Halle, 1881). And if the later period be looked into, it will be found that there is no instance of the use of the historical infinitive in ecclesiastical Latin, which would hardly be the case if this expression had still been current among the people. Besides, our infinitive nowhere appears in the earliest French literature down to the thirteenth century, although it would have found a fitting place in epic poetry, and would certainly have been used if it had then belonged to the language of the people. We see thus that there can have been no uninterrupted transmission from Latin to French. We find a period of about one thousand years during which, so far as we know, the historical infinitive was not used.

We come now to the question whether the historical infinitive was incorporated into French by the learned who borrowed it from classical Latin, or whether we have here an independent development in the French itself. In order to decide this question it is of the greatest importance to find out at what time this mode of expression made its appearance

in French. If we were to find that it was in the sixteenth century by DU BELLAY or by RONSARD, or by some of their fellow reformers of language, it would be extremely probable that they had taken it from the Latin, although the prefixing of the *de* would still be unexplained.

BURGUY ('Grammaire de la langue d'oïl' I, p. 210), and following him P. CLAIRIN ('Du génitif latin et de la préposition *de*.' Paris, 1880, p. 241) give a single instance of the occurrence of the historical infinitive in Old French:—*Et li sengliers se couche, et cil de grater* ('Roman des Sept Sages de Rome,' publié par LE ROUX DE LINCY. Paris 1838, p. 23). The passage as printed in the original reads: *Et le senglier se couche, et cil du grater*. LE ROUX DE LINCY's edition is printed from a manuscript of the thirteenth century.

To this one instance I am able to add another, which was pointed out to me by PROFESSOR TOBLER, in the Supplément of the 'Roman du Renart' (edited by P. CHABAILLE):

Atant li autre chien sallirent  
Qui moult durement l'envayrent  
Tenir le cuidèrent et prendre,  
Mais il ne les vault pas attendre;  
Ains s'en fui sans demorer.  
*Et li levrier après d'aler,*  
Et li venerres de randon  
S'en va après tout abandon,  
Si lor eschape, molt li poise.

The manuscript is described by ERNEST MARTIN ('Examen critique des manuscrits du Roman de Renart.' Bâle, 1872) as belonging to the fourteenth century; but the language belongs decidedly to an earlier period, so that this example, too, must be ascribed to the thirteenth century. These are the only cases I have been able to find in Old French, but they are sufficient. It would never have occurred to a writer of amusing stories in the thirteenth century to borrow the historical infinitive from Latin, and to provide it with a euphonic *de* or *du*. We must then assume that at that time our infinitive already formed a part of current speech, hence it must have developed in French itself and was not introduced by the learned.

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